# A FREE BED

*by Louisa May Alcott*

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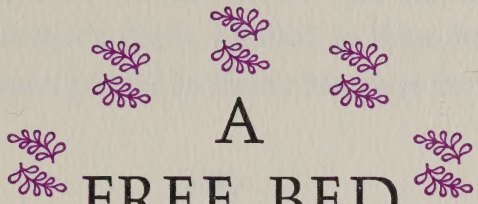

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*by Louisa May Alcott*

*Edited and with an introduction by*
*Madeleine Stern*

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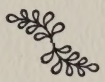
A short story by America's best-loved author of juveniles. Now published for the first time, on the ninetieth anniversary of the author's death. Limited to three hundred fifty numbered copies printed by Henry Morris at the Bird & Bull Press



*The provenance of this manuscript is almost as dramatic as Louisa Alcott's pseudonymous thrillers . . . from attic trunk to dealer, to auction house to university library, the Alcott manuscript has enacted its own picaresque romance.*

*—Madeleine Stern*

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# INTRODUCTION

Rarely does a complete, original Louisa May Alcott manuscript appear on today's market. Owing to Miss Alcott's immense popularity in the nineteenth century, any existing materials were enthusiastically collected; indeed, some manuscripts were sold page by page and are now irretrievably scattered. Thus it is no small distinction for the Brigham Young University Library that it has acquired the complete manuscript of a previously unpublished short story by America's best-loved author of juveniles. Aside from its obvious historical value, the manuscript is significant in that it illustrates well Louisa Alcott's technique of transmuting her experiences and surroundings into fiction.

The provenance of this manuscript is almost as dramatic as Louisa Alcott's pseudonymous thrillers. Before it came under the auctioneer's hammer, it had passed through the hands of at least two dealers. In the 1960's it had been discovered by a private individual who had purchased a house in Wellesley, Massachusetts, where, in an old trunk in the attic, underneath a layer of newspapers, he came upon numerous letters as well as the Alcott manuscript. According to that discoverer, the house belonged to the daughter of a Boston minister who had

published and edited a religious periodical. Possibly the manuscript had been submitted for publication. At all events, from attic trunk to dealer, to auction house, to university library, the Alcott manuscript has enacted its own picaresque romance.

The signed holograph manuscript consists of 11 1/2 pages on twelve separate numbered octavo leaves. Captioned "A Free Bed," the manuscript is neatly penned and is initialed "L.M.A." at the end. The initials, however, have been crossed out and the full byline, "by Louisa May Alcott," has been inserted in a different hand. The byline would suggest an editorial pen, although the handwriting is definitely not that of Alcott's editor, Thomas Niles of Roberts Brothers. Thus far, "A Free Bed" has not been located in a printed version.

Although undated, the manuscript can be traced to the writer's final years when, beset with illness, she sought relief for body and soul. In December, 1886, Louisa Alcott, suffering from insomnia and debility, moved to a nursing home run by the homeopathic physician, Dr. Rhoda Lawrence, in Roxbury, Massachusetts.[1] There she spent her last months trying a variety of remedies ranging from Clapp's triturations to Murdock's liquid food, and it was when she wearied of hospital life that she undoubtedly tried her hand at such a story as "A Free Bed."

It is a simple story that could scarcely have taxed her ef-

forts. Devoid of plot, "A Free Bed" is a static tale, suspended, timeless. The only action is an emotional and ethical progression. It consists solely of a conversation between two women, both ill and aging, one querulous, the other filled with fortitude. The conversation, setting, and characters are all representative of the hospital environment that was Louisa Alcott's world during the last months of her life.

How Miss Alcott transformed this world into fiction is perhaps the most intriguing aspect of this story for the literary historian. While she was in Dr. Lawrence's hospital she wrote a letter describing her literary habit of converting details of her life into fiction, spinning a story as a spider spins a web:

> Any paper, any pen, any place that is quiet suit me . . . Now . . . I . . . can write but two hours a day . . . While a story is underway I live in it, see the people, more plainly than real ones, round me, hear them talk . . . Material for the children's tales I find in the lives of the little people about me . . . In the older books the events are mostly from real life, the strongest the truest . . .

In this case the events are from "real life." Of course, the conversation between the complaining Mrs. Moody and the cordial Mrs. Cheerable is representative of attitudes found in many hospital situations, but the evidence that serves to distinguish reality from fiction is supplied by Mrs. Cheerable in her reference to the owner of the hospital. When she says, "I . . . bless the day Dr. Z. told me about her hospital," she

provides the literary detective with a clue that turns fiction into biography.

Dr. Z. proves to be none other than the pioneering physician Marie Elizabeth Zakrzewska[2], founder of the New England Hospital for Women and Children. Born in Berlin in 1829, she studied midwifery and emigrated in 1853 to the United States where she became a pupil of Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell. During the Civil War, she founded her own hospital for the three-fold purpose of providing competent women physicians for women, giving women the opportunity for practical medical study, and training nurses. Her efforts met with success and her ten-bed hospital expanded. In 1872, the hospital was moved to Roxbury, Massachusetts, where Dr. Lawrence's nursing home would also be located.

There is additional evidence connecting Dr. Zakrzewska with Louisa Alcott. It seems that the board of directors included both Alcott's friend Ednah D. Cheney and her cousin Samuel E. Sewall. The resident physician was Samuel Sewall's daughter, Lucy. Marie Elizabeth Zakrzewska was obviously well-known to Louisa May Alcott, and the New England Hospital for Women and Children provided her with both a cause to support and a source for her writing.

She used the hospital world in which she lived out her last months as source material for a short story of moral uplift which she entitled "A Free Bed." In a direct and simple way,

the story demonstrates the Alcott literary technique of transmuting life into fiction. Although the story is a minor effort, it is nonetheless "multum in parvo," and the Harold B. Lee Library is proud to publish it on the ninetieth anniversary of the author's death.

1. For details of Louisa Alcott's life during this period see Ednah D. Cheney, ed., *Louisa May Alcott: Her Life, Letters, and Journals* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1889), pp. 296, 329-404; and Madeleine B. Stern, *Louisa May Alcott* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), pp. 323-341, 404-407.
2. For information concerning Dr. Marie Elizabeth Zakrzewska see Edward T. James, ed., *Notable American Women 1607-1950* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971) III, pp. 702-704; and Agnes C. Vietor, ed., *A Woman's Quest: The Life of Marie E. Zakrzewska, M.D.* (New York and London: Appleton, 1924), pp. 299, 487 and *passim.*

# A FREE BED

*by Louisa May Alcott*

"My dear soul how do you do? I've been longing to see you ever since I got back, but haven't had the energy to stir out till a sleepless fit made it absolutely necessary for me to get air & exercise,"[1] said Mrs Moody sinking into a chair beside the bed where lay her friend, a placid, sweet faced woman who answered with a cordial smile,

"Busy & happy you see. I am sorry your jouney [sic] has not done you more good, but you are fortunate in being able to enjoy this lovely weather," & the invalid's patient eyes turned wistfully toward the glimpse of sunny blue which was all she had seen of the outer world for many months.

"I suppose I am, but it is very tiresome to be driving or walking in this aimless sort of way for one's health. My nerves are in such a state I cant bear shopping, calling or sight-seeing, yet I dont get a wink of sleep unless I am out half the day. I do wish somebody would invent amusements for invalids like us," sighed Mrs Moody with a fretful knitting of the brows as she glanced about the pleasant room trying to discover the secret of her friend's reposeful air.

"I *have* invented one for myself & find great comfort in it. Let me tell you about it & see if you cannot get as much rest as I do out of my free bed," answered Mrs Cheerable taking up her work again.

"I have heard of air beds, water beds & spring beds, but what *is* a free bed? I'll have one, no matter what it costs, if it will only give me sleep," cried Mrs Moody, curiously surveying the couch on which her friend lay smiling at her.

"I mean endow a free bed in a hospital & take an interest in the poor souls who use it."

"Oh, is that all? I'm afraid my nerves would not let me do much, & the mere idea of the thing would scare sleep away."

"I haven't found it so, for though I did not expect to be able to do more than give money, so much occupation, pleasure & interest have grown out of the act that I find it more helpful to me than any medicine, for my mind & hands are so busy I have no time for ennui, & bless the day Dr Z. told me about her hospital."[1a]

"What *can* you do beside pick lint & roll bandages?" asked the guest, remembering war times with a shudder.[2]

"In the first place I sent some old linen & clothes to the patient who happened to lie on my bed. I naturally felt curious to hear about her & the Dr. was glad to tell me the sorrowful little story. She soon died, but I found inexpressable [sic] comfort in being able to make her last days easier & the

blessing she sent me was a balm to my own weary soul. Then a child came, & for her I made toys, picture books, little slippers, & recieved [sic] droll messages that kept me merry as well as busy. Winnie got well & came to see me full of gratitude to the unknown lady who had been a sort of good fairy to supply her wants. That was very nice, & made me feel as if I was of some use in the world after all.

No. Three was a poor girl ready to perish soul & body; but that beneficent hospital took her in & cured both. I was so glad & proud to help; so grateful too, for, seeing such misery, made my own lot seem very bearable & I was ashamed to murmur. She too came to see me with her baby in her arms, & I never shall forget the look on her face as she said with repentant tears that washed her sin away,

"I cant go wrong again when you have done so much to put me right & make me glad to live for baby's sake."

"Go on, please, it is very interesting. Who came next?" asked Mrs Moody with full eyes as the speaker paused to look up at the fine picture of the Christus Consolator, hanging at the foot of her bed, for in it the divine hand rests upon the Magdalen's bent head.[3]

"Only one more patient has laid upon my bed, for I have not had it long, & she still lies there waiting for death so cheerfully that I am learning of her to overcome my fear of it. For her I select books, & we write to one another. She is a per-

son of education & refinement, but poor & friendless, so it is very sweet to me to know & comfort her. Her letters are remarkable, for her character is a noble one; you shall read them sometime, or better still go & see her for me if you will?"

"I will if you think I can bear it. Does she suffer much?" asked Mrs Moody full of sympathy & interest.

"Constantly, but never complains, & the sight of such fortitude will do you good. The mere knowledge of it has helped me to be patient because I know that time will probably bring my cure, & her courage without hope is a most inspiring example. So you see, dear, that I gain more than I give, & my days are full of pleasant work, my wakeful nights of comfortable, helpful thoughts & memories. I never feel alone now, shut out from active life, forgotten or useless, for so many tender ties bind me to these fellow sufferers that this year of seclusion has been one of the happiest I ever knew. If I recover I have learned much that will serve me all my life; if I am to die I shall try to do it without fear or lamentation as this brave friend of mine is showing me how to go."

"What an angel you are! & Mrs Moody stopped impulsively to kiss the lips that preached such a timely sermon to her. "I am glad I came; I feel better already, & I'll go out this very day to see the hospital. Let me take something for that woman, as a sort of introduction from you."

"Thanks, I always have a little parcel ready for some one

there. I dont confine myself to my own bed but do what I can to cheer up the other patients so that none need feel friendless. See, I amuse myself with making little books like these, for they are light to hold, cheerful to look at & helpful, I hope, since a chance word in time of suffering & solitude often does a world of good. As I read my papers & magazines I am constantly finding good bits for my books, so it gives new interest to my own reading & makes me feel as if I were quite a literary character."[4] & Mrs Cheerable laughed such a happy laugh it was good to hear & see her as she showed her pretty work with pride.

"I should like to borrow one if I may? Consider me a new patient & follow up your first prescription by setting me to work. I'm ashamed to be idle when you are busy yet so much more helpless than I." & Mrs Moody took up one of the volumes of different colored paper whose gay leaves were full of sensible hints on "Health," the title painted on the cover.

"Take any you will, & as a reward for your docility you shall carry my friend this book, "Sursum Corda,"[5] the best collection of sweet & comfortable words for the sad & suffering ever made. Make her pillow easier by a few kind words & I am sure you will find rest on your own tonight."

"As you do, dear soul!" & Mrs Moody went away with a happier face than the one she brought, having found the panacea for her own weariness in sympathy & self forgetfulness,

& in the book she carried a little verse marked by the friend who practised [sic] the sweet gospel she preached—

"So tired: yet I would work
For Thee! — Lord hast thou work
Even for me?
Small things — which others hurrying on
In Thy blest service, swift & strong,
Might never see?"[6]

# NOTES

1. Original punctuation has been maintained except where modification was necessary for clarity.

1ª. That "Dr. Z." is really Dr. Marie Zakrzewska is further substantiated by the fact that Dr. Zakrzewska was a close associate of Miss Alcott's friend and biographer Ednah D. Cheney. In 1890, when presenting Dr. Zakrzewska with a copy of her *Louisa May Alcott: Her Life, Letters, and Journals,* Mrs. Cheney addressed the doctor as her "dear friend and wise counseller [sic]." This presentation copy is now in the possession of the BYU Library.

2. Louisa Alcott remembered those "war times" well. She had served as a nurse in the Union Hotel Hospital, Georgetown, D.C., between December, 1863 and January, 1864 when she was invalided home. Her *Hospital Sketches,* serialized in *The Commonwealth* prior to book publication in 1863, was based upon her nursing experiences. See Bessie Z. Jones, ed., *Hospital Sketches by Louisa May Alcott* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960), *passim*; Stern, *Louisa May Alcott,* pp. 117-130, 381-382.

3. Christ as Comforter or Consoler was not an uncommon subject in sentimental religious painting of the nineteenth century. Carl Bloch, 1834-1890, Danish painter, executed a "Kristus Consolator" in 1875. Curiously *Christus Consolator* is also the title of a compilation of *Hymns for the Suffering and Sorrowing* assem-

bled by the Rev. Augustus C. Thompson (New York: American Tract Society, [1869]).

4. The "making little books" from magazine and newspaper "bits" is a recurrent theme in Alcott stories as well as in her life. In describing her early career she remarked: "After frightening my sisters out of their wits by awful tales whispered in bed, I began to write down these histories of giants, ogres, dauntless girls, and magic transformations till we had a library of small paper-covered volumes illustrated by the author." [Cheney, ed., *Louisa May Alcott,* p. 398]. The scrapbook method appears in Louisa Alcott's *Will's Wonder Book* where grandma sets up "a scrapbook . . . in which I put all the anecdotes about birds, insects, and animals, that I find in the papers." [Madeleine B. Stern, ed., *Louisa's Wonder Book - An Unknown Alcott Juvenile* (Mount Pleasant: Clarke Historical Library of Central Michigan University, 1975), pp. 9, 53]. The Alcott addiction to the scrapbook method is apparent in her series entitled *Aunt Jo's Scrap-Bag.*

5. [Mary Wilder Foote Tileston] comp., *Sursum Corda. Hymns for the Sick and Suffering* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1877). Louisa Alcott and Mary Tileston were among Roberts Brothers' most successful authors. As "official anthologist" for Roberts Brothers, Tileston assembled numerous compilations for the firm during the 1870's and 1880's. *Sursum Corda,* which Louisa Alcott singled out, was "intended for all who need comfort and strength, and especially for invalids." It became a "steady favorite." Indeed Emerson, from whom Louisa May Alcott often borrowed books, had a copy in his library. See Walter Harding, *Emerson's Library* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1967), p. 273; Raymond L. Kilgour, *Messrs. Roberts Brothers Publishers* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1952),

pp. 131, 150, 159; [Tileston] comp., *Sursum Corda,* p. v and *passim.*

6. [Tileston] comp., *Sursum Corda,* p. 147. The poem from which the stanza is quoted is entitled "Tired" and appears in the section "Submission in Sorrow."

*Three hundred fifty copies have been printed for the Friends of the Brigham Young University Library by Henry Morris at North Hills, Pa. The text was composed in Garamond types and printed on Hodgkinson's B & B hand made paper in December, 1978.*

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